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KGB zeroes in on Western labor organizations

NEW YORK — Some years ago the Central Intelligence Agency ran across Soviet operatives penetrating a European-based international labor organization — known in the trade as a “secretariat.” The agency then learned that the trail twisted westward to the United States and an American union official. He wasn’t a spy but neither was he allergic to Russian agents. The CIA tossed the ball into the FBI’s court and few know where it bounced.

The bureau has long been forbidden to investigate political proclivities of labor or its officialdom. There is, of course, always open season on those in the crime combines, embezzlers or kick-back artists.

But the CIA does have its labor desk — and always has. Some of its specialists even became station chiefs.

And some U.S. union chiefs denounce the “agency” for looking too intensely into the world’s labor movement. Behind the scenes this became an ugly controversy because the critics constantly charged that American intelligence officers hadn’t any right to go behind anything bearing a union label, even abroad.

Well, the other day a former KGB major, Stanislaw Lewtschenko, who served under Yuri Andropov for nine years before defecting, stated on the record that one of the Soviet secret police directives was to infiltrate and influence “international labor organizations.” There are a score of such global secretariats. They run “congresses.” From their European headquarters they dispatch fact-finding commissions across the world.

In the past these secretariats have been selective in pressuring “exploitive” governments. Only recently, predominantly because of the torment of Poland’s Lech Walesa and Solidarity, have they begun to equate communist regimes with exploitation.

Chiefs of the secretariats don’t appear to distinguish a KGB infiltrator from some bookstore vendor on Paris’ Left Bank. However, we now have the word of an ex-KGB major that Soviet secret police have been ordered into the mainstream of world intellectualism and proletarian organizations in order to influence opinions everywhere, degrade the West, smear the United States and so throw the opposition on the defensive.

European labor organizations, when properly maneuvered, can always put tens of thousands of demonstrators onto the street to howl down American visitors and allied causes.

Now the KGB, modernized and more a three-piece-suit outfit than the old leather-jacket and heavy-overcoat thuggery, is on a fast two-track trip. One speeds propaganda, another carries the express train of violence, to paraphrase Lenin.

For some years now, as Andropov took full power from the muscle-headed secret police chiefs who stretched between Stalin’s Lavrenti Beria and himself, there have been bloody upheavals on the shop floors of Europe’s biggest industrial complexes.

In 1979 and ’80, communist cadres did their riotous duty in the big Fiat plants in Turin, Italy. Anti-communist workers were beaten, stalked on their way home and mauled if they insisted on productivity.

Machinery was smashed or sabotaged. The KGB’s objectives were to destabilize the huge factories, cut down the output (which they did by the thousands of cars) and make life impossible for management.

Soon shop-floor civil war shifted to France. Communists fought non-communists. Plant gates were assaulted. Stalinist (or Brezhnevite) union chiefs attempted to drive non-communist workers from their

machines, assembly lines, jobs and bread.

In Britain, at least one national labor chief has steadily vowed to bring down the government with a strike in his critical industry.

Actually, one British left-wing strike did topple the government politically, not forcibly. So this report isn’t a dialectic on arcane secretariats. This isn’t a sermon on the need to get a handbook on recognizing KGB agents. It is a hymn of regret that the words of ex-Soviet secret police major Stanislaw Lewtschenko didn’t impact the American public.

The defector, lost in the obscurity of “safe houses,” did warn of KGB infiltration into “the peace movement” as well as “international labor organizations.”

Virtually all American unions belong to some international secretariat. But the global networks are based almost exclusively in Europe. American union chiefs attend the congresses — usually in Europe. Resolutions whacking the United States are written usually in Europe and scarcely are read during hectic days of life in a foreign city.

Andropov’s KGB has one target — the United States. So, American labor will have only itself to blame if some secretariat hangs it on its own dues petard.